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"Peace Corps Assignments Land Wapak Native in Ecuador" (1999). *News Releases*. 8563.
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July 12, 1999
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PEACE CORPS ASSIGNMENTS
LAND WAPAK NATIVE IN ECUADOR

DAYTON, Ohio — When Matt Hepp of Wapakoneta graduated from the University of Dayton in 1997, he wasn't ready to settle into the 8-to-5 lifestyle of corporate America.

When he joined the Peace Corps two months later, the mechanical engineering graduate's own future quickly took a back seat to his new vocation.

Selfishness had no place in the tiny Ecuadoran village of La Y de la Laguna, Spanish for "the Y of the lake," where Hepp set right to work designing a water distribution and purification system to alleviate the need for the villagers' daily mule treks to the lake for water every morning.

Hepp, who lived in a "luxurious hut" with a bamboo floor and a thatched roof, learned to take nothing for granted. In "La Y," a 20-kilometer hike off the main highway, electricity, plumbing and clean water were frills reserved for wealthier and more accessible towns. The only available electricity came from generators, which were used only in dire emergencies — or the 1998 World Cup soccer matches, Hepp laughed.

Now in his second assignment, Chorocopte, in Ecuador's Cañar province, Hepp is utilizing his environmental engineering minor in a paramo grassland conservation project and helping to introduce trout production as an alternative to cattle ranching, which is destructive to the ecosystem of the region.

Hepp has become quite resourceful in his year and a half in poverty, and he marvels to his friends about the diverse uses of pig dung.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe all the stuff you can do with (it)," he wrote in a letter to fellow 1997 mechanical engineering graduate Sharon Wolf. "I'm gonna build anaerobic biogas digesters all over Ecuador to turn (it) into methane gas and great organic fertilizer. And you can

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also use it to feed a type of fish called tilapia. They're great tasting, easy to grow, and it's also a great way to reduce runoff and contamination of the local rivers, lakes and streams. Total waste management!"

When Hepp left the states, his Spanish vocabulary was limited to the words "tequila" and "cerveza." After three months of training in Spanish, followed by total cultural immersion, he said he communicates quite well with his new neighbors.

After Hepp completes his 27-month commitment to the Peace Corps in May 2000, he still doesn't see himself settling into the suit-and-tie set. He plans to first spend five months snowboarding in Argentina. After that, he'd like to land a "sweet" job, "maybe designing mountain bikes or mountaineering equipment."

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For media interviews, contact **Matt Hepp** by e-mail at matthepp@hotmail.com.